

# The Effect of Textual Enhancement Technique on Incidental Learning of Idiomatic Expressions of Iranian Intermediate Students

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**Abstract**—One of the techniques affecting incidental learning is using textual enhancement. This study was conducted in order to see whether textual enhancement positively affects incidental learning of idiomatic expressions. To do so, a quasi-experimental study with pretest-posttest control group design was carried out. The participants were 40 Iranian intermediate learners selected via convenient sampling and were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups, 20 participants in each. Before the treatment, Idiom Knowledge Scale (IKS) test, taken from Wesche and Paribakht's (1996) was administered to both groups, as pretest. Then the experimental group was exposed to idioms presented with four different textual enhancement techniques (color-coded, bolded, italic and sticky papers). After the treatment, IKS, was again administered to the groups, as posttest. The results of data analysis through ANCOVA indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group and that the implementation of textual techniques could enhance the incidental idiom learning.

**Index Terms**—textual enhancement, incidental learning, idiomatic expressions

## I. INTRODUCTION

Learning idioms can be considered as an integral part of vocabulary learning. Textual enhancement (TE) has been defined by Nassaji and Fotos (2011) as "an external attention drawing device whereby any particular feature of the oral or written input can be made perceptually salient to L2 learners in a planned way so that they can notice the targeted forms without any explicit metalinguistic explanation" (p. 41) (as cited in Jahan, and Kormos, 2015). Burke (1998) claims that "knowledge of slang and idioms is fundamental to nonnative speakers' understanding of the language that native speakers actually use" (p. 5) (as cited in Jessica, Rodriguez, 2013). Considering the large portion of idioms in any discourse, one can claim that idiom learning is a challenging task for language learners. One of the problems of language learners is, after attending many English classes for some years, not being able to use idioms naturally as natives do. Perhaps, one of the reasons for this problem is the approaches utilized to teach them. The learners need some novel methods that makes them interested in idiom learning, change the mood of the class positively, and also stimulate their learning process at the same time (Huyen & Nga, 2003).

According to Decarrico (2001) "learning occurs when the mind is focused elsewhere, such as on understanding a text or using language for communicative purposes" (p. 289) (as cited in Tanimi, 2015). A great portion of lexical items in first language (L1) and second language (L2) is acquired incidentally (Hulstijn, 2003). So there seems to be a need to provide opportunities for greater incidental idiomatic expressions learning in the classroom.

In 1981, Sharwood Smith presented the technique of *consciousness-raising* as an attempt to solve second/foreign language teaching/learning problems that appeared in focus on forms approaches. *Consciousness-raising* means that the language teacher tries to raise the language learners' consciousness of the new target form(s). However, the syllabus was still synthetic (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1989; Sharwood Smith, 1981). In addition, Sharwood Smith (1991) stated that even if the language learners paid attention to the enhanced target forms, this does not guarantee that they will be able to internalize the form. Moreover, many (Truscott, 1998) have criticized the term because of the lack of the theoretical support for the relationship between conscious and input processing. Therefore, Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) replaced the consciousness-raising term by input enhancement that the teacher can control. The role of input enhancement is to make some forms of the second/foreign language more salient in order to draw the language learners' attention to them. In fact, Sharwood Smith (1991, 1993) divided salience into two kinds: external salience that the teacher or researcher can manipulate and internal salience that language learners cause. There are some techniques that teachers or researchers could use to increase the external salience. As for the internal salience, Park and Han (2008) suggested some factors that can enhance such a kind of salience. These factors are comprehension failure, the learner's current inter-language knowledge, the learner's bias for meaning over form, learners differences and the learner's first language.

N. Ellis (1993, 1995) stated that input enhancement is an effective option in language teaching and learning. Some studies, for example, Lee and Benati (2007) have shown the usefulness of the role of salient input (enhanced input) in directing the learners' attention to second/foreign language forms (discussed in the next paragraphs). However, input enhancement does not guarantee that input becomes intake unless language learners are able to notice the input. Wong (2005) makes a distinction between focus on form and input enhancement. Based on the former learning occurs incidentally in a communicative setting. The latter could be proactive or reactive and does not require a communicative interaction.

Lee and Benati (2007) divide the research on input enhancement into two main components. The first one is manipulating the input that the language learners are presented with using one of the input enhancement techniques. The second component is manipulating how learners interact with the input they are presented with. When using textual input enhancement or what might be referred to as visual input enhancement, the target form(s) that the students are exposed to have different textual properties. These forms might be bolded, capitalized, italicized, underlined or highlighted with different colors (Sharwood Smith, 1993). When implementing such a technique, researchers and teachers either attract the students' attention or direct their attention. The purpose behind textual enhancement is to give the target forms features that are more salient in order to help the learners to notice these forms and to make form-meaning connections. Textual input enhancement has the advantage of directing the learners' attention to form while processing meaningful input. In addition, it can be easily combined with other types of input enhancement such as input flood (e.g. White, 1998). However, textual enhancement is similar to input flood because it does not always guarantee that the learners will notice the target forms and if they did, it does not guarantee that they will understand what it is supposed to be understood. In addition, the focus on the target form might hinder the focus on meaning (Wong, 2005). This kind of input enhancement is only carried out in written contexts in which language teachers present the language learners with a reading material that contains textually enhanced target form(s).

Over the years, researchers have studied textual input enhancement for several purposes. Some of them studied the effect of textual input enhancement when combined with other input enhancement techniques such as input flood (White, 1998) and explicit instruction (Heo, 2007). Others combined textual enhancement with other instructional treatments such as focus on form (Shook, 1994), output activities (Izumi, 2002), simplified input (Wong, 2003) or topic familiarity (Lee, 2007). Some studies, on the other hand, compared textual enhancement with other input enhancement techniques such as explicit instruction (Kubota, 2000; Shook, 1994). A third group studied the effect of textual input enhancement on "noticing" (Alanen, 1995; Leow et al., 2003). However, it seems that the major concern of researchers has been to study the effect of one or more textual enhancement techniques on the students' "noticing" and/or acquisition of grammatical structures in a second/foreign language setting (De Santis, 2008; Ha, 2005; Leow et al., 2003).

In an attempt to examine whether input enhancement makes L2 forms more noticeable to learners' online processing of target forms, Jourdenais et al. (1995) conducted a study. The results showed that learners in the enhanced group noticed and produced more target forms, providing evidence that highlighting the forms in the input increased the likelihood of their being noticed (as cited in Birjandi, Alavi, & Najafi Karimi, 2014). Shook (1994) studied visual or textual enhancement in second language context to determine whether this kind of input was effective in drawing learners' attention to L2 forms. The results showed that those subjects who received the enhanced versions of the passages, performed significantly better than the group who read the unenhanced versions of all the texts. Shook (1994) subsequently states that textual enhancement made a difference, and gave the participants the ability to recognize and produce the target forms. He also points out that there were no significant differences between the group who were told explicitly to pay attention to the enhanced forms and those who did not receive this explicit instruction. This means that reading the enhanced versions was enough for subjects to make improvements in their production without explicit direction (as cited in Birjandi, Alavi, & Najafi Karimi, 2014).

Kim (2003) investigated the relative effectiveness of typographical enhancement, lexical elaboration, and a combination of both among a relatively large sample of Korean learners of English. Three types of texts were used in this study: (1) an explicitly lexically elaborated text with target words followed by a synonym or a definition type vocabulary explanation; (2) an implicitly lexically elaborated text with an appositive vocabulary explanation only; and (3) a typographically enhanced text with target words set in bold face to test the acquisition of 26 low-frequency words. The results showed that (a) lexical elaboration alone did not facilitate form recognition of L2 vocabulary; (b) explicit lexical elaboration alone led to more meaning recognition of L2 vocabulary; (c) typographical enhancement alone did not facilitate form and meaning recognition of L2 vocabulary; (d) lexical elaboration and typographical enhancement combined led to more meaning recognition of L2 vocabulary; (e) both explicit and implicit lexical elaboration facilitated meaning recognition of L2 vocabulary (f) there was no significant difference between explicit and implicit lexical elaboration in terms of their effect on form and meaning recognition of L2 vocabulary (as cited in Birjandi, Alavi, & Najafi Karimi, 2014). Birjandi et al. (2014), conducted a study to examine the relative effectiveness of three types of input — unenhanced input, typographically enhanced input, and lexically elaborated input — on learning English phrasal verbs. To do so, a time series quasi-experimental study was carried out, in which six different texts in three different forms — unenhanced, enhanced, and elaborated — were given to 35 Iranian intermediate EFL learners to read. After the participants read each version of the input, a post-test including the target phrasal verbs practiced in each

section of the treatment was administered. The results showed that the participants' scores on the post-tests were higher after reading the elaborated texts than their scores after reading the unenhanced and enhanced texts. It has been concluded that (a) typographical input enhancement better helps L2 learners learn English phrasal verbs as compared with unenhanced input, (b) lexical input elaboration better facilitates the learning of English phrasal verbs by L2 learners as compared with unenhanced input, and (c) lexical input elaboration is more effective than input enhancement in helping L2 learners to learn English phrasal verbs.

## II. METHOD

### A. Research Question and Hypothesis

Do textual enhancement techniques have a significant effect on intermediate Iranian EFL learners' incidental learning of idioms?

Textual enhancement techniques positively affect Iranian EFL learners' incidental learning of idioms.

### B. Participants

40 participants, as sample, were selected out of 56 female EFL students at intermediate level of proficiency via convenient sampling. All of the participants were Persian native speakers whose aged ranged from 18 to 30 years old. They were studying a book entitled English Result by Hancock and McDonald (2008), under the instruction of the same teacher in Safir Language Academy, Kermanshah, Iran.

### C. Instruments

In the present study the following instruments were used. The first one was the Preliminary English Test. PET is an English language examination provided by Cambridge English Language Assessment (1994). Cambridge English Preliminary is an intermediate level qualification which demonstrates the ability to communicate using English for everyday purposes. The second one was the Idiom Knowledge Test (IKS) developed based on the Wesche and Paribakht's Vocabulary Knowledge Test (1996). It was used as pretest to check whether the participants knew the targeted idioms or not. The third one was a parallel form of IKS which was administered as posttest.

### D. Materials

The target idioms were derived from "Can You Believe it?" by Huizenga and Huizenga (2005).

### E. Procedures

40 participants were selected via convenience sampling and were randomly divided into control and experimental groups. Before the treatment a pretest idioms was administered to the groups. Each group of participants were exposed to new idioms each sessions. As to the experimental group the learners were exposed to a text in which the idioms and their meaning were enhanced through some textual techniques (color-coding, bold-facing, and italic). Participants were asked to read the texts and answer some follow up questions. Concerning the control group, the participants were exposed to the same texts and idioms but they were unenhanced and the learners were asked to read the sentences and infer the meaning of each idiom using contextual clues. Finally, a posttest, parallel to the pretest, was administered to the groups.

## III. RESULTS

Since in this study there was pretest or covariate which might have affected the groups' scores on the posttest, ANCOVA was used to adjust or remove the effect. As it is evident in Table 1, the mean score and standard deviation of the experimental group on the pretest were 2.50 and 1.701 and they were 7.10 and 2.673 respectively on the posttest, and the mean score and standard deviation of the control group on the pretest were 2.55 and 1.468 and they were 3.25 and 1.372 respectively on the posttest.

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF GROUPS' SCORES ON THE PRETEST AND POSTTEST

group		pretest	posttest
experimental	Mean	2.50	7.10
	N	20	20
	Std. Deviation	1.701	2.673
	Minimum	0	4
	Maximum	5	13
control	Mean	2.55	3.25
	N	20	20
	Std. Deviation	1.468	1.372
	Minimum	0	1
	Maximum	5	6
Total	Mean	2.53	5.17
	N	40	40
	Std. Deviation	1.569	2.863
	Minimum	0	1
	Maximum	5	13

As Table 2 shows the experimental group's scores on pretest and posttest were distributed normally ( $p > 0.05$ ).

TABLE 2  
THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP'S SCORES ON PRETEST AND POSTTEST AS PRODUCED BY ONE-SAMPLE KOLMOGOROV-SMIRNOV TESTC

		pretest	posttest
N		20	20
Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	Mean	2.50	7.10
	Std. Deviation	1.701	2.673
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.166	.265
	Positive	.129	.265
	Negative	-.166	-.123
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.740	1.185
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.643	.121

a. Test distribution is Normal. b. Calculated from data. c. group = experimental

As Table 2 shows the experimental group's scores on pretest and posttest were distributed normally ( $p > 0.05$ ).

TABLE 3  
THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE CONTROL GROUP'S SCORES ON PRETEST AND POSTTEST AS PRODUCED BY ONE-SAMPLE KOLMOGOROV-SMIRNOV TESTC

		pretest	posttest
N		20	20
Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	Mean	2.55	3.25
	Std. Deviation	1.468	1.372
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.170	.219
	Positive	.130	.219
	Negative	-.170	-.158
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.762	.979
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.607	.293

a. Test distribution is Normal. b. Calculated from data. c. group = control

As Table 3 shows the control group's scores on pretest and posttest were distributed normally ( $P > 0.05$ ).

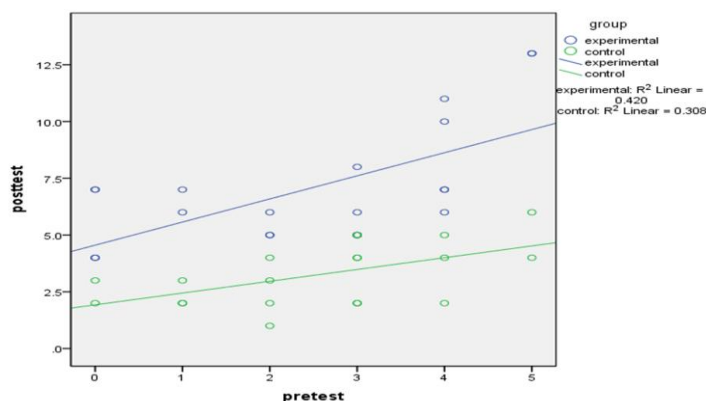


Figure 1 Linear relationship among regression lines

Since the lines run parallel, their slope is homogeneous for all groups concerning both pretest and posttest implying that one of the requirements of ANCOVA was fulfilled.

TABLE 4  
ANALYSIS OF COVARIANCE (ANCOVA)

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects					
Dependent Variable: Posttest					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	216.270 <sup>a</sup>	3	72.090	25.074	.000
Intercept	112.793	1	112.793	39.230	.000
group	18.541	1	18.541	6.449	.016
pretest	55.460	1	55.460	19.290	.000
group * pretest	5.851	1	5.851	2.035	.162
Error	103.505	36	2.875		
Total	1391.000	40			
Corrected Total	319.775	39			

a. R Squared = .676 (Adjusted R Squared = .649)

Table 4. shows that the slope of regression lines was homogeneous for all groups [ $F_{(1,36)} = 2.035$ ,  $p = 0.162$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ].

TABLE 5  
UNIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE  
DEPENDENT VARIABLE: POSTTEST

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	210.420 <sup>a</sup>	2	105.210	35.597	.000	.658
Intercept	107.962	1	107.962	36.528	.000	.497
pretest	62.195	1	62.195	21.043	.000	.363
group	151.301	1	151.301	51.192	.000	.580
Error	109.355	37	2.956			
Total	1391.000	40				
Corrected Total	319.775	39				

R Squared = .658 (Adjusted R Squared = .640)

Table 5 shows that the main effect of the treatment was significant [ $F(1, 37) = 51.192$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta = 0.580$ ].

#### IV. DISCUSSION

Regarding the research question and its corresponding hypothesis, the result of the data analysis showed that the main effect of the treatment was significant [ $F(1, 37) = 51.192$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta = 0.580$ ]. Since the experimental group outperformed the control group in their performances on learning idiomatic expression, it appears that the textual enhancement has had positive effect on learning idiomatic expressions by the participants in the experimental group.

Concerning the finding of the study some explanations may seem logical. First, enhanced texts become more salient compared with unenhanced ones and, perhaps, draw the learners' attention. Second, enhanced texts via some techniques are motivating and stimulating in the process of learning.

The result of this study is consistent with those of Ellis (1993, 1995), Sharwood Smith (1993) and Birjandi, et. al. (2014). These studies found that textual enhancement has positive effects on learning. Ellis (1993, 1995) pointed out that input enhancement is an effective option in language teaching and learning. Sharwood Smith (1993) found TE as a way to facilitate learners' noticing of targeted grammatical forms and enhance their acquisition. Birjandi, et. al. (2014) found that typographical input enhancement helps L2 learners learn English phrasal verbs as compared with unenhanced input.

The result of the present study, however, is different from those of Leow (1997), Izumi (2002), Wong (2003) and Overstreet (1998). Leow (1997), showed that textual input enhancement had no significant effect on noticing and comprehension. Izumi (2002) compared the effects of visual input enhancement and output production on the noticing and acquisition of a grammatical form. Those who received visual input enhancement failed to show measurable gains in learning.

The results of Wong (2003) revealed that text enhancement did not have positive impact on the knowledge and acquisition of the target forms (as cited in Birjandi, Alavi, & Najafi Karimi, 2014). Overstreet (1998) reported that there was no positive effect for either text enhancement or content familiarity on production and recognition (as cited in Birjandi, Alavi, & Najafi Karimi, 2014).

##### A. Limitation of the Study

This study suffers from some limitations. One of the limitations of this study was that the participants were just conveniently selected only from an English institute. So, the generalizability of findings must be treated more

cautiously. Another limitation of the study was the gender of the participants which was limited to female learners. As gender is an important variable in language learning, it may affect idiom comprehension and production; hence, the results of the present study may be different with male learners.

### B. Conclusion

The question “Does textual enhancement techniques positively affect learners’ incidental idiom learning?” was answered positively and the corresponding hypothesis “Textual enhancement techniques have a significant effect on incidental idiom learning” was verified. So, textual enhancement techniques such as color-coding, bold-facing, italic have positive effect on noticing the targeted forms by the learners and thereby enhancing their acquisition. The pertinent environment with textual enhancement techniques may make the input more comprehensible, and the constant exposure to different idioms can be considered as a good trigger to facilitate the incidental idiom learning. Textual enhancement, as an alternative to the traditional ways, can boost learners’ motivation and excitement which, in turn, will bring about better idiom learning.

### C. Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study may have some pedagogical implications. Teaching and learning idioms plays a crucial role in mastering a second or foreign language. So using textual enhancement techniques regarding learning idioms will be significant for three groups. First, for teachers, because they can use multiple techniques in teaching idioms to enhance their students’ second language learning. Second, For the students, because they can try a mixture of different techniques in their own learning experiences, instead of the traditional rote learning of idioms; and finally, for the material developers, because the results of the present study show the positive effects of textual enhancement techniques on learning the idioms, they can provide idioms books which are more comprehensible for students through applying different textual enhancement techniques according to students’ interests, level, gender, and culture.

### D. Suggestions for Further Research

As a word of recommendation future research are suggested to test enhancement techniques on vocabulary in general, proverbs and collocations across age, gender, and students’ level of knowledge.

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